The Personal History, Experience, and Observations of David Copperfield the Younger
by Charles Dickens
Charles Dickens

• PERSONAL INFORMATION:
• Family: Born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England; died of a paralytic stroke, at Gad's Hill, Kent, England, June 9, 1870; buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, June 14, 1870; son of John (a clerk in the Navy Pay Office) and Elizabeth (Barrow) Dickens; married Catherine Hogarth, April, 1836 (separated, 1858); children: ten. Education: Taught at home by mother; attended a Dame School at Chatham for a short time, and Wellington Academy in London; further educated by reading widely in the British Museum.

• CAREER:
• Novelist, journalist, court reporter, editor, amateur actor. Editor of London Daily News, 1846; founder and editor of Household Words, 1833-35, and of All the Year Round, 1859-70; presented public readings of his works, beginning 1858.

Autobiographical narratives

- fashion for autobiographical narratives created by success of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847)
- first of Charles Dickens's two major novels to employ the first-person method throughout (the other is Great Expectations).
- reminiscent of such 18th century novels as Tom Jones, in which the structure is derived from the adventures and relationships of the hero
- begins with David's birth and keeps him firmly in sight throughout
- appeared in volume form in the same year as the long autobiographical poem *The Prelude* by the great poet of memory, Wordsworth

Fact or fiction?

- Some of David's childhood experiences correspond closely to those of Dickens himself.
- The fragment of autobiography that Dickens had written in 1847 is reproduced almost verbatim in the early part of the novel.
- David's relationships with various women (his mother, his nurse Peggotty, his first wife Dora, and his second wife Agnes) may be seen in terms of Dickens's own relationship with his mother, his wife Kate, and his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth.

Dickens, Copperfield and women

• Dickens's mother and nurse represent two sides of female nature as Dickens perceived it
  – David’s mother is sexually attractive but weak, pettish, and incompetent
  – The nurse Peggotty is maternal, dependable, and domesticated
  – Aunt Betsey, who rescues him from destitution and neglect, is grotesquely unfeminine but serves as a fairy godmother or substitute mother
  – Little Em'ly, later seduced by Steerforth, is like a reincarnation of David's mother
  – Dora, his first wife, is also sexually desirable but weak-natured and a hopeless housekeeper
  – Agnes has the merging of qualities that go to make the perfect wife

Illustrations and Characters

• **David Copperfield** is notable for the richness and variety of its characterization and contains some of Dickens's most familiar figures.

• Charles Dicken’s loyal illustrator: “Phiz” (Hablot K. Browne)
  - Mr. Micawber is partly a portrait of the novelist's father, the improvident John Dickens.
  - Martha is a somewhat melodramatic study in the “fallen woman” – Dickens was interested in social reforming of prostitutes.
  - The emigration of Mr. Peggotty to Australia reflects Dickens's concern with “family colonization”.
  - Uriah Heep is one of the most celebrated of Dickens's villains.
  - Steerforth represents the genteel kind of villainy, owing to romantic stereotypes associated with such figures as Byron and Shelley.

• Who are the memorable characters to you?

My magnificent order at the public-house

- Phiz (Hablot K. Browne)
- August 1849
- Etching
- Dickens's David Copperfield, ch. 11, "I Begin Life on My Own Account, and Don't Like It."

- Image scan and text by Philip V. Allingham.

My first fall in life

- Phiz (Hablot K. Browne)
- November 1849
- Etching
- Dickens's David Copperfield, chapter 19, "I Look about Me, and Make a Discovery."
- Image scan and text by Philip V. Allingham.

Source: http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/dc/15.html
Cookery as Social Reform

• The Victorian passion for intense and critical self-focus produced literature that both described the society and instructed people on how they ought to behave.
• In addition to the literary debate over issues involving industrialization and labor reform, the growing middle class brought forth even more concerns that attracted the attention of Dickens as a reform-minded author.
• The perceived need for educational materials that would instruct the newly "middle" middle class resulted in a large variety of writings focused upon the proper ways to dress, to dance, to bathe, and to cook and dine.
• Dickens, through his editorial control over the journals Household Words and All the Year Round, sought to "root out social disharmony." It is well known that Dickens's efforts contributed greatly to sanitation reform and the improvement of working conditions in factories.
• Marlow points out, however, that "not so well known are his efforts as the editor of two popular journals to alter the national disgrace in private realms of animal economy and domestic economy known as English cookery" (145).

David’s culinary education and reform

- In classic bildungsroman fashion. David must learn the rules of courtship, employment, and education, but he must also learn how to eat and drink in moderation to successfully enter into the middle class.
- Moving from a working-class fear of not having enough to eat, David must learn to deal with the opposite problem: when to stop eating.
- After leaving the Murdstone’s, David’s ignorance enables the waiter to take advantage of the boy by eating and drinking most of his food. Later, the other riders on the coach assume that David ate all the food himself and ridicule him. This mockery achieves its effect when David internalizes these social rules.
- In preparing for his first dinner party, David makes an extensive order to the wine-merchants drinks to excess. Steerforth's laughter at David's drunken behavior, while kinder in attitude than the mocking of the coach riders and servants, serves the same function, as both impress upon David the need to moderate his intake. Later in the night, the theater crowd also chastises David for drinking too much by exclaiming "Silence!" to him and his friends.
- The novel shows that society enforces rules about moderation of food and alcohol through various verbal abuses, such as mockery, friendly laughter, and chastisement.
- Middle-class men did not overeat because that was a practice of lazy aristocrats, but they did not drink too much because that was characteristic of working-class men. Moderation of food and drink situates the middle-class man between two undesirable points: the bloated, overfed aristocracy and the drunken, violent working class.

Dickens in popular culture

• Will Manley – Librarian essayist and humorist writes:
  – “What wearies me about Dickens, however, is his excessive use of words. J. D. Salinger put it well when he began *The Catcher in the Rye* by having Holden Caulfield say to his psychiatrist, "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap."
  – He proposes that if Dickens had put down the pen after young David Copperfield arrives at Aunt Betsey’s seaside home, this would be a lovely 300 page book with a satisfying ending.

David Copperfield at the movies

- In 1934 Freddie Bartholomew, W. C. Fields, and Lionel Barrymore starred in the MGM film *David Copperfield*; it was also filmed in 1969, with Susan Hampshire and 1999 with Maggie Smith.
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